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THE DAY OF SMALL THINGS

WHEN the distracted English teacher turns from the perusal of what her college pupils are supposed to hold at fingertips ready for examination, to the business world with its denunciation of everything but technical English, and hears meanwhile her fellow laborers wondering how it is that Miss M. capitalizes so extraordinarily, and Miss K. makes "it" refer to ten different things on one page; and when the afore-said English teacher considers that she has three brief periods a week in which to accomplish all that is expected of her, she loses, at least temporarily, that sense of serene leisure which belongs to literature as its right, as the only atmosphere in which it can flourish.

I find myself in this mood of distraction with sufficient frequency, so that I know how "dull, stale, flat, and unprofitable" seem all the devices for accomplishing any results, since the utmost that can be done seems to fall so infinitely short of the ideal. Yet for that very reason it has seemed to me that there might be some to whom the gospel of "the day of small things" might prove a consolation. I venture therefore to tell of two recent experiments of mine, which may serve to show how certain cultural purposes may be well subserved at the cost of but little time.

The first experiment, which is known in my classes as the "poem-a-lesson" plan, I have tried for over a year now; the second, the daily oral composition, I have inaugurated this year with the senior classes only. The poem and the oral composition open each English lesson, and together take, as a usual thing, about five minutes—a five minutes that, I think, exceeds in value any other five minutes of the English period.

By the poem-a-lesson plan each girl chooses some one poem for reading aloud. Before the lesson she puts the name of the poem and its author, the dates of his life, and her own name on the board; all this material the girls copy at once into blank books, thus accumulating a steadily increasing list. Before reading, she gives a short exposition in order that the thought of the poem may be easily followed. Then she reads the poem as well as she can. Sometimes I comment in a word or so upon poem or reading; many times we turn at once to the next number on the program, the oral composition.

Last year, after the classes had made the round of their membership, we gave two entire lesson periods to review of the poems, the girls calling for poems which they had liked and therefore wished to hear again; or for those they had forgotten and therefore wished to hear again. Sometimes the poem was read without the author's name to see if the girls could supply it, as they often could. I had not realized till the review days came how much the class had enjoyed the plan. Girls are normally so polite, or in some cases politic, that their real feeling is not discovered by the form of question, "How many really like this poem plan?" It was from comments voluntarily offered and from quiet observation that I began to realize that the plan was a genuinely profitable and pleasurable one. Hence I was encouraged to repeat it this year in the third-year classes and extend it to the senior classes as well.

There is some restriction put upon the girls' choice. They are more familiar with eighteenth and nineteenth century poets than with any others, therefore I have encouraged a choice of earlier work, in some cases definitely restricting the selection to the years before 1700. Even in the first choice, however, we have had few contributions that were not genuine poetry; and remembering my own childhood I could not be unsympathetic when *Bingen on the Rhine* and *Somebody's Mother* were presented.

The question of the method of choice is commented on by many of the girls in an exposition of the method, written recently as one of their weekly themes. One writes:

"When a girl chooses her poem she does not take any poem that meets her eye but reads a great many poems before she chooses the one she wants. This makes her read many poems that she would never have read or known about before. It gives her a broader idea of poetry in general."

Another has the moral side in mind:

"The naturally lazy girls are forced to work, as they would perhaps read several poems before they chose one which would be of the right century and at the same time satisfy them."

It is needless to say that just such possibilities had occurred to the teacher.

The girls speak of finding interest in watching for the cropping out of different tastes in their companions:

"Some girls choose picturesque poetry. Many of the younger girls like childish poems; some of the older ones, perhaps, also. In poems of narration we hear stories of war. Again we have the sad story, which may appeal to many of us. It is well understood, however, that in our class humorous poems always receive a welcome."

The girls readily recognize the advantage of preparing the work so that its presentation will be acceptable to the class.

"It teaches us first to go over a poem that we are about to read, to get the ideas it contains, and then to enjoy every word as we read. This plan helps the reader to think as she stands and discusses the subject before the girls. It also gives her more ease in reading or speaking in class."

As for the poems themselves, the comments on the value of the work are many. One girl writes:

"I think the chief advantage of this plan is that it makes the girls acquainted with poets and poems which otherwise they would not have known at all. Thus by each girl's doing a little work the whole class is benefited. In our English work we have not time to read, as a class, all those beautiful short poems, and practically the only means we have of getting acquainted with these poems is by the poem-a-day method."

Another says:

"I think that besides giving us the names of poets, it gives us also a pretty clear idea of what were their different styles. For instance, by having so many of Robert Herrick's short poems read, I have been brought to notice what charming, gay little poems he has written."

The dates of the poets' lives and occasional judicious comments from the teacher help to group poets in periods and show their affiliations with other writers of the same time. My third year girls last year became comfortably inoculated in this way with some idea of the religious and Cavalier poets of the seventeenth century.

Not all the poems are liked, — a state of affairs apparently due sometimes to the poem, sometimes to the presentation. One girl writes, with the frankness I like to cultivate:

"Some poems are dull and seem to put the class to sleep."

The second point of view is expressed by another critic:

"One girl may string off a lot of words that mean nothing to her, and thus impart nothing to her audience."

Not every reader thoroughly likes her own choice. The amount of restriction brings that difficulty once in a while. I remember asking one of the girls last year — a very intelligent and interesting girl, but of most decided likes and aversions in literature — why she chose Herrick's *Daffodils*. The girls were just then restricted to Milton's century. "Well, I liked it better than anything else," she said, in a tone that relegated the remainder of the seventeenth century to

"that limbo large and broad,
The Paradise of Fools, to few unknown."

Some of the girls love poetry already and so welcome the plan on that account, rejoicing in old favorites when they appear, and, again, delighting in new acquaintances. Some

begin to find an enjoyment in poetry they have hardly known before. Of course not all poems are remembered. One girl writes:

"The listeners though they will not be likely to remember all the poems will be likely to remember quite a number. Some of the poems which were read in class last year have been selected by other girls during this year. Quite a number of the girls remembered them, showing that they had benefited by our 'poem-a-lesson' plan."

Such a plan, if steadily pursued, must introduce to the girls between seventy-five and one hundred poems during the year. Among those poems that my pupils have spoken of with especial pleasure are:

<i>Wages.</i>	<i>O, my love's like a red, red rose.</i>
<i>Crossing the Bar.</i>	<i>Counsel to Girls.</i>
<i>Death the Leveler.</i>	<i>The Night Piece to Julia.</i>
<i>The Last Conqueror.</i>	<i>The Triumph of Death.</i>
<i>To a Skylark.</i>	<i>The Gifts of God.</i>
<i>The Daffodils.</i>	<i>The Blind Boy.</i>
<i>On a Favorite Cat.</i>	<i>Why so pale and wan, fond lover?</i>
<i>Cupid and Campaspe.</i>	<i>The Yankee Girl.</i>
<i>John Anderson.</i>	<i>To the Fringing Gentian.</i>

That the plan has proved an enjoyable one, a "pleasant start" for the lesson, as one puts it, I am convinced from the comments of the girls themselves. In spite of the brevity of the exercise, I feel sure that as we laugh over one and comment on the stern beauty of another, the companionship in enjoyment makes the experience cumulative and gives it a definite value.

The second plan, that of the oral composition, I have left myself short space for describing, yet I think it has proved even more popular than the poem, largely, I suspect, because the work of their own number is, from that very fact, interesting to the rest of the class. My reason for adopting the plan was two-fold. I wished to give an opportunity for oral work, and I wished a chance to emphasize constantly and in public the value of word choice, upon which our fourth year is supposed to lay especial stress. To accomplish the latter aim, I at first limited the girls to description, hoping that the effort to use the telling, specific phrase would gradually become a habit. To that end, again, I for a time devoted a moment or so after each oral composition to letting the class give back the most vivid details and happy phrases of the composition. It took scarcely a minute and yet it set the pupils to watching for such phrasing and helped the next girls to do as well or better. The next work is to be narrative; exposition—scientific and artistic—following; argument, probably, last of all. These types will undoubtedly demand a somewhat longer time for presentation. The little themes

are planned out, perhaps written out, beforehand, but delivered without notes. Then they are written in a book kept for the purpose, a book open to any girl to read.

I am aware that the work has so far been too brief to give chance for that sustained presentation of a subject which our pupils deeply need; yet I am sure that the effort to choose appropriate words, to make clear-cut sentences, above all, the effort to face and hold an audience (sustained through sixty seconds) is one in kind with that needed for a sixty minute speech. Sixty seconds is really a very long time.

The girls' comments on this work are full of interest to the experimenter. Concerning the method of preparation I give three comments.

"Some of the girls learn the compositions. I do not think it is a good idea to be wholly dependent on the words written."

On the other hand, another says:

"I do not think there is any objection to memorizing as long as one has a sufficient supply of words at her command to replace other words that slip out from her mind."

Still another writes:

"The girls have different ideas about preparing the oral compositions. Some write them out and learn them word for word. This promotes stumbling as a rule. Some who are blessed with fluency of speech keep the principal ideas in mind and speak easily upon the subject, choosing the best words to express their meaning."

The delivery of the composition is a distinct ordeal, but that its value is fully recognized such comments as the following show:

"The compositions show us wherein lie our faults, either in the writing or the delivery of the theme, as the criticisms of our listeners are generally plainly written on their faces." "In one way I wish that each girl could have more turns at the oral composition, because as in my case I dread the day to come, yet I realize that if I had to do it more often, I should soon get accustomed to it."

Upon the general character of the compositions I should like to give two comments.

"Some of the themes, although very vivid in description, have so little of human feeling in them that they become dry and uninteresting."

"Some girls know how to give that little finishing touch to their compositions which makes the difference between the interesting and uninteresting theme."

We are increasingly anxious in these days — we teachers — to focus the attention of our pupils on the whole group they recite before so that a group consciousness may take the place of the undue subordination of the pupil's mind to the teacher's. I am convinced that just such exercises before an audience

whom the speaker feels bound to interest, help the development of this social consciousness.

The girls have especially enjoyed certain of the nature descriptions and the descriptions of children, as these separate comments show.

"The one I liked best of all, was the description of a little girl playing with her toys."

"I liked especially the little boy under the elm tree."

"He beckons me too to become acquainted with him."

"These compositions awaken in a girl a love for the beautiful things in the world and teach her to watch for them constantly."

Another comments on the fact that the pupils learn to recognize and discard such hackneyed phrases as *rosy cheeks*, *golden locks*, *babbling brooks*. I must confess, however, that another speaks with great satisfaction of having learned to call the sun *a golden ball of fire!*

From two papers I should like to quote, in closing, a little more at length. They are written by two especially interesting pupils.

"We searched most diligently for odd expressions and vigorous touches. . . . Before descriptions have always seemed to me tiresome and of a monotonous sameness, but I can truthfully say I have enjoyed these oral compositions. It is a pleasure to listen to the new and odd expressions. They are just like the mysteries of a new language only so much more real and beautiful."

"I look forward to having these compositions on English days. I don't know why, but it always sends a little thrill of delight over me to hear some new or especially pretty word used. I think that this drill in the choice of words and expressions is an essential feature of an English education. I know that in me it has awakened a new interest in composition writing. It also gives a girl confidence to broaden her vocabulary. I don't think we have ever had a more delightful plan for daily work. I hope that if I ever teach I shall have an opportunity to adopt and carry out this plan."

No doubt at that far-away date she will find a better device for "the day of small things."

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ANNOUNCEMENT OF MARCH MEETING TENTH ANNIVERSARY

Plans for the March meeting of the Association are being formed. We shall meet in Boston on Saturday morning, March 11. The topic for discussion will be *The English Course in Secondary Schools*. The complete program will later be sent to you.

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